

Report recommends more complete telling of Baylor history

March 23, 2021

Baylor University will not change its name or remove a statue honoring its slaveholding namesake co-founder, but an independent commission recommended tangible steps to present a more complete picture of Baylor's history with regard to race.

Baylor released on March 23 the full 90-page report the [Commission on Historic Campus Representations](#) presented to the university's board of regents last month.

Regents created the 26-member commission last year to review Baylor's historic links to slavery and the Confederacy and to offer recommendations about how to present the university's history, including how Baylor deals with on-campus statues, monuments and buildings that recognize individuals linked to racial injustice.

Among its many recommendations, the commission encouraged the university to:

- Create a new monument on Founders Mall recognizing the “unknown enslaved” who labored to construct Baylor’s original campus at Independence.
- Reword or replace some text on memorials to acknowledge founders’ support for slavery and the Confederacy.
- Relocate a monument recognizing Rufus C. Burleson “to a less prominent location” and rename the Burleson Quadrangle.
- Honor and recognize racially diverse men and women—graduates,

faculty and staff—who exemplify Baylor's Christian mission.

'Open hearts and open minds'

In an interview, Baylor President Linda Livingstone and Mark Rountree, chair of the board of regents, both expressed their desire that the "Baylor Family" would receive the report and recommendations with "open hearts and open minds."



Linda Livingstone

"Understand that it's really done as a way to reflect even more effectively than we have before our Christian mission and being willing to look at the hard parts of our history, as well as the really positive parts of our history, to be honest about those and more fully tell that story," Livingstone said.

"And then, look at how we learn from that—how that is redemptive for us and how that can bring reconciliation and healing in our community and move us forward as an institution."

As the university administrative team begins to develop an implementation plan for the regents' consideration, she said they will look at Founders Mall and Burleson Quadrangle "holistically."

The university may work with an outside design firm as it explores the best

way to honor the intent of the commission's recommendations while telling the story of Baylor's history most effectively and inclusively, she said.

'Construction rather than destruction'

Rountree said he was struck by the consistent way in which the commission carried out an "addition rather than subtraction approach"—a "construction rather than destruction" approach—in its recommendations about how to present Baylor's history.



Mark Rountree

The way the commission dealt with the lives of Baylor's founders and early leaders—including their links to slavery—was "consistent with the gospel message of redemption and reconciliation," he added.

"The commission in its report identified these grievous sins in our leaders' and our founders' past not to denigrate them, but to integrate that part of their lives into the whole narrative we tell of their lives, as well as the early days of the university," Rountree said. "That part of the commission's evaluation does not humiliate our founders and early leaders. It humanizes them."

“By helping us to understand more fully their humanity, including their flaws, their frailties and—in the case of slavery—their heinous sins, we can also better see and recognize what God in his mercy and providence accomplished through them, in spite of their frailties and failures.”

Honoring first two Black graduates

In conjunction with the report’s release, Baylor announced plans to erect statues recognizing the university’s first two Black graduates—Robert Gilbert and Barbara Walker—in front of the Tidwell Bible Building.



Baylor University regents approved the final phase and total project budget of \$21.2 million for the restoration of Tidwell Bible Building.(Baylor University Photo)

Last summer, Baylor created its Trailblazer Scholars Program, a scholarship initiative designed to recognize the importance of fostering diversity and mutual respect at Baylor. Its first cohort of students in fall 2021 is named in honor of Gilbert and Walker.

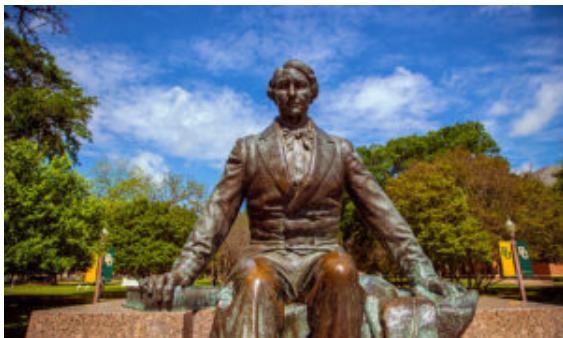
Baylor expects to review sculptors and initiate design proposals in early summer and select a sculptor in early fall to create the statues.

The statues of Gilbert and Walker will be located across the street from

Founders Mall, home to the prominent statue of Judge R.E.B. Baylor and smaller monuments recognizing co-founders William Tryon and James Huckins.

No name change for Baylor

“Our institution will continue to be known as Baylor University. And like the name of our institution, the statue of our namesake and founder, Judge R.E.B. Baylor, will maintain its current location and presence on our campus,” Rountree wrote in a March 23 letter to the “Baylor Family.”



A large bronze statue of Judge R.E.B. Baylor is located on Founders Mall on the Baylor University campus between Waco Hall and Pat Neff Hall. It was dedicated Feb. 1, 1939. (Baylor University Photo)

Baylor was “not a perfect man,” and as a slaveholder, he “engaged in a practice we know to be sinful and abhorrent,” Rountree wrote, adding, “We do not justify nor downplay the evil of slavery.”

At the same time, Baylor helped establish a university where “hundreds of thousands of students—which now include all races and creeds—[could]

receive a unique educational experience that combines academic excellence and Christian commitment," he continued.

"We will continue to recognize Judge Baylor for the founding of Baylor University, just as we commit to presenting a more complete history of the university," Rountree wrote.

Ties to slaveholding and the Confederacy

As the board of regents acknowledged in a [resolution](#) last summer, the commission report acknowledges Baylor's founders—along with 11 of its earliest trustees and its first four presidents—were slaveholders, and several continued to justify slavery even after the Civil War.



The Baylor seal is seen at the Burleson Quadrangle on campus.
(Photo / Baylor Marketing and Communication)

"Like other institutions whose early leaders and financial supporters placed the chains of slavery around Black men and women, Baylor University continues to be detrimentally chained to the sin of enslavement," the commission report states in its introduction.

Baylor was “financially enriched” in its early years by “the contributions of wealthy slave owners,” the report acknowledges, and the university in subsequent generations “benefitted from the accrued value of those financial investments made possible by the institution of chattel slavery.”

“However, ‘the fatal poison’ of slavery has remained in circulation, in both latent and manifest forms, within the body of Baylor University over the course of these many years, and it will continue to prove an impediment to the university’s full realization of its potential as a Christian research university until it is extracted and its damages remedied,” the report states, quoting a phrase from abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

Baylor’s historic roots to slavery and the Confederacy “require unflinching confrontation and intentional acts of repentance,” the report continues.

Examining on-campus monuments

While the monuments in Founders Mall in the 1930s and 1940s were not Confederate monuments, they did “commemorate a white Baylor, the white slave-owning leaders of Baylor University’s early years, and those leaders’ contributions in the context of a culture of white superiority,” the report states.



The Burleson Quadrangle on the Baylor University campus honors

former Baylor President Rufus Burleson. During the Civil War, he served as a chaplain to the Confederate army. After the war, he was an advocate for the free public education of freed slaves and was instrumental in the formation of Bishop College, a historically Black school. (Photo / Baylor Media & Communications)

Baylor President Samuel Palmer Brooks identified the Baylor monument to Rufus C. Burleson as a Confederate memorial in response to a 1906 survey from the Confederate Memorial and Literacy Society.

In addition to looking at the problematic history of some of Baylor's founders and early leaders, the commission report also calls on the university to engage in "acts of inclusion" that recognize the diversity of the "Baylor Family."

Co-chairs of the commission were Alicia D.H. Monroe, provost and senior vice president of the Baylor College of Medicine; Gary Mortenson, dean of the Baylor School of Music; and Walter Abercrombie, former NFL star and associate athletics director of the Baylor "B" Association of the university's lettermen. Under their guidance, the commission spent five months studying scholarly documents prepared by researchers in the areas of Baptist history and Baylor's history.

Prior to the release of the full commission report, Baylor scheduled three online forums to allow a larger audience to explore many of the same issues the commission examined and discussed.

The [first forum](#) in the "[Baylor Conversation Series: Perspectives on Our](#)

[History](#)” explored slavery in America, and the [second](#) examined slavery in Texas and among Baptists. The first two panel discussions featured historians. A [third forum](#) featured the co-chairs of the commission, who talked about Baylor’s history.

Key findings about founders

Findings regarding Baylor’s founders and early leaders included:

- R.E.B. Baylor was the owner of 33 enslaved individuals in 1860, and those slaves constituted a significant portion of his personal wealth. As a judge, he “presided in cases that resulted in the punishment of an abolitionist harboring an escaped slave, the punishment of a man for not returning a borrowed slave promptly, the sentencing of a slave to hang for arson, the execution of another slave in 1856, and the execution of a slave for ‘intent to rape a white female.’”
- Both William Tryon and James Huckins were slaveholders while they were employed by the American Baptist Home Mission Society, and they served on the Southern Baptist Convention’s Domestic Mission Board when the SBC was formed. A member of Huckins’ church in Galveston once registered an objection against his ministry after allegedly hearing Huckins beat an enslaved female. Huckins was commissioned as a chaplain in the Confederate Army.
- Rufus C. Burleson, who served twice as Baylor’s president, owned at least one enslaved person and served as a chaplain in the Confederate Army. As university president, he urged male students to fight for the Confederacy against what he called “abolition despotism.” After the war, he continued to voice support for the “Lost Cause.”

Ironically, Burleson also was instrumental in founding Bishop College, a

historically Black institution, and in forming New Hope Baptist Church in Waco, a Black congregation.

Moving forward

“We cannot change these men or their actions, but we can change how we represent their stories,” the commission report states. “We need to tell the whole truth of these individuals—their fallen nature, their sin, and how they perpetuated a great evil in our nation.”

For example, the report states the text on the Judge R.E.B. Baylor monument identifies him as a “constructive statesman,” but the commission concludes: “His work upholding and advancing slavery was not constructive. When put in historical perspective, it was rather destructive and remains a legacy that we still live with today.”

The report also takes issue with a statement on the monument that says he “exemplified in his life the motto of Baylor University: Pro Ecclesia/Pro Texana.”

“Judge Baylor was pro-church—but it was a church that supported slavery and unjust treatment of men, women and children based on the color of their skin,” the report states. “There is no evidence in God’s word supporting injustice and inhumane treatment of Black persons; therefore, to preserve the honor and credibility of Baylor University’s commitment to the Christian faith, this statement must be removed or further explained.”

Moving forward, Rountree emphasized all actions the board of regents and university take in response to the commission’s report and recommendations “will be guided solely by our Christian mission, anchored singularly in the gospel’s pattern for redemption and reconciliation, and directed at fostering an environment through which racial equality is inextricably linked to our mission and in which students, faculty, staff,

alumni and friends of color know they are valued and loved throughout the Baylor community."

The full report is available at www.baylor.edu/diversity/commission.